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by 2nd Lt. Angela Martin
47th Flying Training Wing Public Affairs

12/16/2011 - **LAUGHLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFNS)** -- Three Afghan air force lieutenants will soon be returning to Afghanistan with silver wings after graduating from Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training Dec. 16 here.

After competing against more than 350 potential Afghan pilot candidates, these three lieutenants are the first from their country to attend and graduate SUPT here.

"This was a dream of mine to get my wings, and this is really exciting for me to have my dream come true," said one of the lieutenants. "I'm proud of myself, but I'm also proud of my instructors whose vision was to see us get our wings. I'm proud of my country and proud of the United States government, especially the Air Force, for providing this opportunity for our dreams to come true."

However, these lieutenants had a tremendous journey prior to their arrival here. As part of the selection process, the Afghans went through physical fitness tests, aviation and communication lessons and received flight physicals. They also went through basic English lessons and culture classes to test their ability to learn in an American environment.

After passing these screening programs, the Afghan lieutenants were determined to have the skills necessary to be successful in a SUPT program in the United States. They traveled to the Defense Language Institute English Learning Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, to learn the English language.

According to one of the lieutenants, SUPT candidates attended the most advanced English classes and were required to be completely fluent before attending SUPT. They had one year to meet this prerequisite, and not everyone passed the program.

"Learning English was very important because if you are in the air and cannot communicate very well, then you are in trouble," he said. "If you don't understand the air traffic controller, then you'll be hanging out in the air for a while until you run out of gas. But there's no refueling or pulling over at the gas station to say, hey, I want to fill up with gas!"

After meeting the language requirements, the Afghan lieutenants continued their journey to Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, where they were one step closer to making their dreams come true. However, making their dreams a reality only became more difficult. One of the Afghans described SUPT as the hardest year of his life.

"Pilot training keeps you busy for a full 12 hours a day," he said. "It is not hard physically, it is hard on the mind."

During SUPT, the Afghan lieutenants trained in the T-6 Texan II for nearly one year. In one year, they flew nearly 200 hours, more than 140 flights and had more than 40 simulator rides.

"I flew with almost 64 instructors while I was here," one Afghan lieutenant said. "I kept all of my mission data cards with all of my instructor's signatures, it is history for me."

The Afghan lieutenants attribute their success to the hard work, kindness and support of their instructors and fellow SUPT students who were always willing to help them study, prepare for flights and clarify words they didn't understand. According to one of the lieutenants, The day we get our wings here is the vision of their hard work. They were great friends and always there for us."

However, the Afghan lieutenants said they knew they could have never made it to the United States and through SUPT without the

Photos



Senior Airman Richard Weatherby (background) and Airman 1st Class Alexander King prepare to test the masks on two Afghan lieutenants going through Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas. Three Afghan lieutenants are the first from Afghanistan to attend SUPT at Laughlin AFB and are scheduled to graduate here Dec. 16, 2011. (U.S. Air Force photo/2nd Lt. Angela Martin)

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support of their parents.

"Our parents really miss us, but they are very proud of us and know how difficult the training is," one of the lieutenants said. "When I talk to my mother, she is always crying and counting down the days until I come home. My parents are very happy and have a big party planned for all of our family and friends to get together once we return to Afghanistan."

Although the lieutenants are excited to return home, one of the students said he has reservations about returning to Afghanistan. When asked what he will miss about Laughlin AFB, he said his instructors, friends and the American way of life.

"When you guys are sleeping, you don't have a loaded gun at your bedside," he said. "You don't have a gun ready in your home 24 hours a day, you don't worry about checking your six o'clock for someone following you," he said. "We do that back in Afghanistan because officer life is dangerous."

Despite these feelings, each lieutenant is committed to bringing peace and strength to their country. Through their training with the United States, they feel they can help make Afghanistan a stronger country for future generations.

But for now, they said they are focused on returning home and beginning their next phase of training in the C-27A Spartan. This phase will take place in Afghanistan, where they hope to be reunited with instructors from Laughlin AFB. Most of all, they are excited about their accomplishments.

"This was an amazing opportunity for me, and now I'm going back to Afghanistan with my wings as an official pilot," one of the lieutenants said. "Before, I didn't even know what a pilot looked like! My friends can't even believe how I got here."

(For the protection of the Afghan air force lieutenants, names will not be released.)



Comments

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Thanks to the Laughlin SUPT team for contributing to Afghan progress.

Linnes Chester, Las Vegas

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